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## College Focus: Living History

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# LIVING HISTORY



KANSAS' largest teacher preparation college using original documentaries to aid classroom teachers, benefit students

— *By Sarah Caldwell Hancock*



Left: “Dawn of Day” used family histories and other documents to tell the story of Underground Railroad operations in Kansas. Right: Rusty Earl films a scene with local expert Richard Pitts and associate professor Brad Burenheide.



Successful teachers make subject matter come alive for students. Kansas State University's College of Education and its specially produced documentaries are helping teachers do just that for a variety of education-related topics.

The college's documentary about a turbulent period in Kansas history is helping teachers show students how escaped slaves risked their lives to gain freedom with the help of Wabaunsee County, Kansas, abolitionists.

“Dawn of Day: Stories from the Underground Railroad” was released in May 2016, and free lesson plans and DVDs of the 53-minute documentary are available for teachers. The film is also available online along with others the college has produced since 2012 thanks to the efforts of Rusty Earl, the college's video producer.

Earl enjoys the challenges and rewards of the filmmaking process.

“When you dig into people's history and find out what they sacrificed, you get to know them. I like to show the best side of human beings,” he said.

Earl has displayed the best of humanity several times, and his efforts have brought national and international attention to the college. A 15-minute film called “Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project” chronicled how three Kansas students used a school project to learn and tell the story of an unsung hero in Poland who helped save more than 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942. The video has been viewed more than 60,000 times, and has played on KTWU, a public television station in Topeka, Kansas.

K-State's College of Education, with Earl, also developed a video series called “A Walk in My Shoes” to build awareness about students' diversity, challenges and opportunities. The first two videos in the series were about international and military-connected students. The third, a 2014 piece about first-generation college students, was featured in a blog written by first lady Michelle Obama and has been seen by students and staff at more than 100 universities and junior colleges, partially because of promotion from NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising (see Page 34). A new film about social justice in education premiered in October 2016.

## Backyard history

“Dawn of Day” differs from the other documentaries produced by the College of Education because of the level of historical research it required.

“So much research has been done and can still be done,” Earl said. “New discoveries are

being made. We were only recently able to say there was an underground railroad stop near Manhattan, Kansas.”

After separating fact from fiction and doing more research than for any other project, Earl and his team decided to concentrate on Wabaunsee County. The film dramatizes the flight of an escaped slave and shows actual locations where slaves were sheltered. Local experts discuss landmarks, historical documents, family history and the overall effort of those who risked working or traveling on the Underground Railroad.

**“When you dig into people's history and find out what they sacrificed, you get to know them. I like to show the best side of human beings.” — Rusty Earl**

One of those experts is Richard Pitts, director of the Wonder Workshop Children's Museum, a Manhattan nonprofit that offers exhibits and programs to the public as well as camps and after-school programs for kids. Years of working with local youth have shown Pitts that knowledge of heritage and local history is lacking.

“Schools don't teach much about Native American or African-American history,” Pitts said.

Pitts has found that kids of European ancestry may know they are German or Italian, but they don't know about contributions of different groups. He said African-American youth tend to lack knowledge of their histories, so he has tried to help. He shared stories, and he made a timeline with Wonder Workshop attendees and had them add contributions of their ancestors. He also started offering tours in 1997 of Underground Railroad sites in Riley and Wabaunsee counties with the objective of bringing people together.

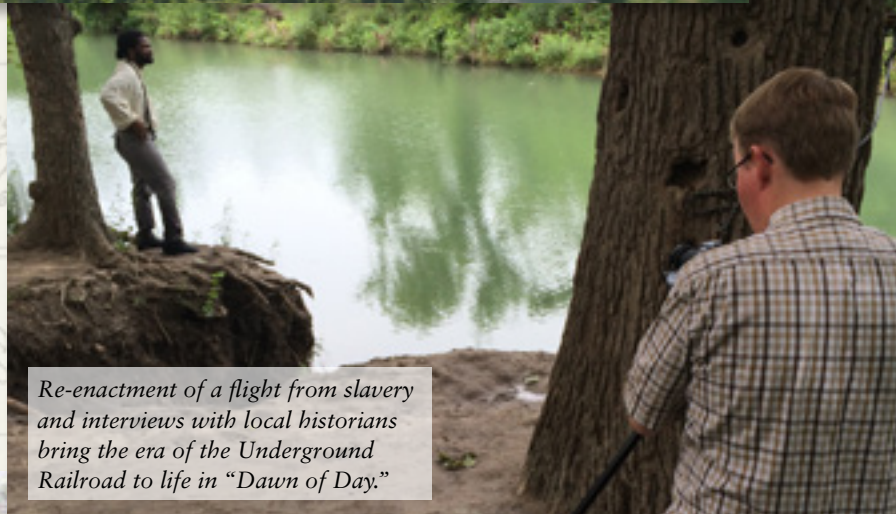
“This is a story that needs to be told over and over again because it shows that that we have always worked together in one way or another. It's not polarizing — it's something that brings unity,” Pitts said.

Brad Burenheide, associate professor of curriculum and instruction, agreed.

“The documentary is a great example of what local and public historians can do to impact society's understanding of history and the events that matter,” Burenheide said.

Burenheide is featured in the film. At one point, Pitts asks Burenheide why it's important to study the Underground Railroad. “My answer is that it offers an episode in history that shows we can do right. Humanity can do the right thing, even in the most dire of circumstances,” Burenheide said.





*Re-enactment of a flight from slavery and interviews with local historians bring the era of the Underground Railroad to life in "Dawn of Day."*



He also is excited about energizing teachers and students to explore their own areas, and Pitts hopes that more people will start looking in their own backyards or find unsung heroes in their towns.

"History not only shows us our past, but inspires us and shows us our potential: People have done extraordinary things with limited resources," Pitts said. "History helps us realize whose shoulders we're standing on. We all contributed to this America that we hold so dear."

### More than marketing

The College of Education expresses a breadth and depth of information through the documentaries that conventional marketing brochures can't convey.

Burenheide said community members have approached him about the "Dawn of Day" documentary, which aired on a Topeka public television station. "They say, 'What else do you do in the college?' It's creative, unique and lasting," he said.

"History is important," said Debbie Mercer, dean of the College of Education, which is the largest teacher preparation program in Kansas. "We don't want part of our history to be forgotten or assume that children are going to automatically know or pick up on what we think is important. We need to be very purposeful in what we share and what we teach them."

Along with more "Walk in My Shoes" films, plans are in the works for another ambitious documentary that follows several first-year teachers in schools across Kansas. The new teachers will keep video diaries that capture their daily challenges and successes.

"The response to our documentaries has been overwhelmingly positive, and I believe that is because we are addressing issues of importance and we are doing so thoughtfully and respectfully," Mercer said. "Rusty is a unique talent in that within him the art and science of videography and the art and science of teaching converge."

"The videos bring validity to the great community work our faculty do," Earl said. "They also show that we care more about our students and their personal stories than trying to pull people in. And the end result is, we pull people in because we show that we care about our people." [k](#)

**NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising** calls the K-State College of Education home. The organization supports advising professionals at K-State and around the world. It also seeks to foster collaborative research between faculty and primary advisors. Charlie Nutt, NACADA executive director, said research in the field is thriving. Serving first-generation college students is a major focus.

NACADA has made the College of Education's "A Walk in My Shoes: First-Generation College Students" documentary available as a resource to its 14,000 members worldwide.

"Many are using the first-generation documentary, and the materials are available online," Nutt said. "Workshops have been presented all over the country based on the information in the documentary and its companion e-book." [k](#)